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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the paradoxes of racial perceptions among Puerto Ricans who were born and bred in Puerto Rico and those born in the mainland United States. The first section deals with the history of different races in Puerto Rico and discusses some of the ways in which Puerto Ricans classify themselves in terms of race. In order to clarify the issues, a study was conducted in which a questionnaire was administered to 100 island born and bred and 100 mainland born and bred Puerto Ricans (50% male, 50% female), all now living in New York City. The questionnaires were in English and Spanish and focussed on issues of dating, marriage, schools, jobs, socializing and public accommodations, place of residence, and familial and personal racial identification. Results indicate that there seems to be a stronger social identification between mainland Puerto Ricans and American Blacks than between island Puerto Ricans and Blacks. All respondents classified themselves as either white or triguero (an intermediate category), avoiding classifications of Black, Mulatto, or other. The findings on the majority of the questions were very diverse and indicated that there is a great deal of ambivalence in Puerto Ricans' racial perceptions. It appears that social, psychological, and economic factors resulting from the Americanization of migrating Puerto Ricans or the heavy Anglo-American influence on the island have contributed to these identity problems. Both the English and Spanish questionnaires are appended. (CG)

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PUERTO RICANS: WHITE OR NON WHITE?

A Study of the Paradox of Race Perceptions Among Mainland Bred and
Island Bred Puerto Ricans.

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Many studies have addressed the question of race and race relations among Puerto Ricans. Most notable among them are the works of Tunin and Feldman (1961) and Eduardo Seda-Bonilla (1961). The literature concerning race relations among Puerto Ricans has prove to be at best, interesting, often times controversial and even more often inconclusive.

A further review of the literature reveals a paucity of studies concerning racial perceptions and racial attitudes held by Puerto Ricans. The question of how Puerto Ricans perceive themselves racially is a crucial question in terms of identity and self worth both on the mainland and on the island. On the mainland there is the tendency on the part of white, middle America to relegate Puerto Ricans to a non-white category. And this has affected the mainland Puerto Rican in so far as where he is able to live and work and whether he has a sense of self worth and a positive self image which means achieving in school or in the job market. The mainland Puerto Rican's reaction, according to Seda-Bonilla (1961) is either acceptance of the non white label as a defense mechanism or total rejection of one's true identity to avoid the non white stigma. On the island, with the overwhelming Americanization of the past thirty years and the recently emerged working middle class, the desire for a white identity is greater than ever. Tunin and Feldman (1961) showed how this was true in the job market and more recently Seda-Bonilla addressed the question of prejudice and discrimination in housing, education, social institutions and even public facilities at a conference on racism in Puerto Rico held at the University of Puerto Rico in 1980. To avoid this reality, one, despite genetics, wants desperately to be white and so Seda-Bonilla came to the conclusion that Puerto Ricans wanting to move up and out indeed suffer from his earlier charge (1961) of cryptomelanism or fear of hidden blood of color. Add to all this that Puerto Ricans, more

often than not, claim that they are not prejudiced and that color doesn't matter, one understands this writer's curiosity to find out what are the individual racial perceptions and attitudes held by Puerto Ricans both on the mainland and on the island.

A clearer insight is needed to understand the standard paradox which says that Puerto Ricans are a non racist people, where color is not an issue and yet they take great pride in the fact that son la gente mas clara or they are the lightest (whitest) people among the Caribbean islands and where in fact color does matter in many aspects of social intercourse. To elaborate on this a little further, a good point of departure here would be to look at the historical perspective. Clearly every issue has a history behind it.

To begin, the Negro made his appearance in Puerto Rico as early as 1510 as a slave. Unlike the neighboring islands, the plantation economy never flourished in Puerto Rico because of Spains restrictive mercantilism which envisioned the island more as a military outpost than as another sugar producing island, competing with the more profitable outputs of Cuba and Hispaniola. As a result, slavery never gained the foothold in Puerto Rico that it would in the other islands. And with the exception of a brief period in the mid 16th century when sugar experienced a short run of prosperity, slaves never amounted to more than 14% or less of the total population. The majority of the labor force in Puerto Rico was free and that included a significant number of free blacks and mulattos. For example, the census figures for 1846, a peak year in slave labor, show that out of a total population of 443, 139 people, almost 176,000 (175,791) were free blacks and mulattos while only 51,000 were slaves. Unlike her neighboring islands, Puerto Rico's economy was never exclusively dependent on slave labor. Therefore, the post emancipation period would

be free of racial vendettas and racial tension.

If one looks at the struggle for emancipation in Puerto Rico, one observes that the landed gentry petitioned for abolition themselves. The leading Puerto Rican abolitionist, Segundo Ruiz Belvis, was the former owner of 300 slaves who had kept his family in very comfortable circumstances. The final victory of emancipation in 1873 was anticlimatic. The struggle itself was just one more aspect of the overall struggle for freedom from Spain's oppressive colonialism. The quest for nationhood included the freedom of all and not just for the whites as was the case in this country's history, despite the exquisite rhetoric of "freedom for all" found in the U.S. Declaration of Independence.

The process of integration was natural and there never appeared the institutionalized forms of segregation that one saw in the United States or in Cuba and which persisted in Cuba until Fidel Castro came to power. Also a tremendous amount of transculturation occurred leaving a very clear Afro imprint on the national culture of Puerto Rico. From this brief historical overview one understands why Puerto Ricans claim no prejudice in their past and thus in their present. At the same time, as was noted, they are quick to say they are the lightest or whitest of the islanders.

This whiteness arises from the fact that after 1815 and more precisely, in the last quarter of the 19th century there was a significant immigration from Europe. Settlers came not only from Spain but from Italy, Corsica, Sardinia, France, Ireland and even Germany. These immigrants, because of Spain's restrictive policy, had their Roman Catholicism in common. They made up the core of the merchant class and large scale farmers. Many would settle in the interior of the island and in the large cities. The coastal plains, given exclusively to sugar cane, would be owned by upper class whites and worked by lower class non whites

and blacks.

Clearly the matter of color was a matter of class. Traditionally the upper class was the predominantly white bourgeoisie while the lower class was predominantly non white or heavily racially mixed. And so class was equal to color. If a non white or racially mixed individual should rise in class status then he was accorded the deference of that class and his color disappeared. These attitudes, however, would change greatly with the emergence of a large middle class in the 1950's and 60's. Under the old rigid class lines, everyone knew his place and thus all may have seemed harmonious and free of racial tension.

But was Puerto Rican society truly harmonious and free of tension? The question is even more difficult to answer in light of the extensive miscegenation that was openly practiced. It was not uncommon because of the promiscuous nature of the Latin double standard - he can, she can't. Thus the landowner s had both their legitimate children and also the offspring of their many liaisons. This meant that family trees not only had many branches but also many colors. It is for that reason that this writer is always wary of the Latin who speaks of his grandfather who came from Spain. But what about grandmother? One is reminded of the situation that the black American anthropologist Zora Neal Hurston in Jamaica in the 1930's. All the very light skinned Jamaicans spoke about their British fathers and grandfathers. Hurston reported that the Jamaicans explained this by saying they were roosters who laid eggs! And so despite any historical explanation, the paradox still remains and we come back to the original question: what are the individual racial perceptions and racial attitudes held by Puerto Ricans?

For the island Puerto Rican faced with the pressures of the new middle class syndrome and Americanization, whiteness is crucial to upward social mobility and advancement.

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When a North American attempts to classify Puerto Ricans into a white or non white category, he is creating a serious problem. The problem centers on the fact that after almost five centuries of miscegenation Puerto Ricans range from all possible colors and shades. As Felipe Luciano has put it, "We are the rainbow people." Of course there are those who fall into the customary fixed category of either black or white, but a great majority fall into intermediate categories, something this country does not recognize. And so in the United States someone like Lena Horne or Julian Bond is considered black despite the obvious difference in color from say Leontyne Price or Barbara Jordan. Joseph Fitzpatrick (1971) was one of the first Americans to recognize how this absence of intermediate categories created a problem for Puerto Ricans, particularly on the mainland. Traditionally Puerto Ricans place more emphasis on hair texture (pelo malo - bad hair) than skin color. Other physical attributes were cited such as lips, nose and then coloring. One is triguëño (literally wheat color or dark skinned), moreno (brown), mulatto, Jabao (high yellow) and so forth. One should also note here, to add to the confusion, that the terms negro and negra are not racial classifications in Puerto Rico but merely terms of intimacy and endearment.

Malvin Delgado (1971) speaking on this problem of intermediate categories stated that traditionally Puerto Ricans were judged according to attributes rather than skin pigmentation. They were not forced to choose between being black or white in order to survive in society. White America, on the other hand, is color blind to the point where they can only differentiate between whiteness and blackness. Consequently, those who fall in the middle spectrum must choose either of the two, if the choice is left to them.

To find out what those choices or perceptions are among Puerto Ricans a simple questionnaire was designed to elicit responses concerning one's

identity and, in turn, one's perceptions towards others - whites and non whites. The questionnaire, in English and Spanish, focused in on issues such as dating, marriage, schools, job market, socialising and public accomodations, place of residence and finally, familial and personal racial identification using yes-no responses.

The sample population consisted of 100 mainland born and bred Puerto Ricans and 100 island born and bred Puerto Ricans all now residing in New York City. The mainlanders were given the questionnaire in English, the islanders in Spanish. Male and female breakdown was considered.

A profile of the mainland group reads as follows:

50 females and 50 males. 80% of the females identified themselves as Catholic and 20% as Protestant. All 50 males identified themselves as Catholic. 2/3 of the males and females identified themselves as middle class while the remaining 1/3 said they were working class. Formal education for the group averages 12 years of schooling. 64% of the males and 88% of the females identified themselves as white while 36% of the males and 12% of the females opted for the intermediate category of trigueno for identification. No one identified themselves as black, mulatto or other.

For the island born Puerto Ricans the profile reads as follows:

50 males and 50 females. 60% of the females identified themselves as Catholic and 40% as Protestant. For the island males the % of Catholic was only 48% with the other 52% as Protestant. The males showed the same % breakdown for middle class (48%) and working class (52%) identification while 52% of the females said they were middle class as opposed to 48% who said they were working class. The median amount of formal education was also 12 years of schooling for the group. 64% of the males and only 48% of the females in this group identified themselves as white while 36% of the males and 52% of the females identified themselves as trigueno. Again, no one opted for black, non white mulatto or other.

FINDINGS

Concerning marriage, 80% of the island males felt it was more desirable to marry a Puerto Rican rather than a white American, while 60% further voiced a preference for black Americans rather than white Americans. Their female counterparts showed a greater preference for white Americans. 60% favored such a marriage while the remaining 40% were split over their preference for Puerto Ricans and black Americans.

Mainland Puerto Ricans thought differently. 76% of the males and 88% of the females preferred to marry only Puerto Ricans and the remainders of males and females voiced a preference for non white mates as opposed to white Americans. As for dating, both groups, islanders and mainlanders, voiced pretty much the same preferences as they did for marriage with one notable exception among the mainland females. Although they almost overwhelmingly preferred to marry Puerto Ricans and non whites, almost half (48%) favored dating white men.

Responses to questions concerning education and schools demonstrate more clearly the racial paradox among Puerto Ricans. While 90% of the island born group felt private schools are better than public schools, 86% felt that blacks and Hispanics are better off in public schools. Among the mainlanders 92% of the males agreed to the first statement and 76% the later. Mainland females were the only respondents to answer affirmatively to the initial statement (84%) and disagree with the latter with only 4% agreeing that blacks and Hispanics were better off in public schools.

Concerning residence and income, both groups overwhelmingly (100%) felt that whites live in better neighborhoods than blacks and Puerto Ricans and also that whites make more money. As for comparable living, 34% of the mainland group felt they live in neighborhoods comparable to middle class whites while 56% of the island group felt they did.

Concerning the question, "The majority of Puerto Rican families

have some family member with black (African) features, both groups answered affirmatively to this statement. 86% of the mainlanders and 76% of the islanders agreed. A follow up question, "But my family is an exception," showed a slight discrepancy among the mainlanders with 78% responding "no". Among the islanders, however, only 58% acknowledged having family members with African traits.

As for socializing, with the exception of the island females, there was a consensus of opinion (100%) that it was more comfortable to dance in an all Puerto Rican or racially mixed club as opposed to an all white club. The island born females expressed a 40% preference for an all white American club and 60% preference for a racially mixed group as opposed to only 40% preference for an all Puerto Rican disco.

Finally, concerning the question, "Black and Puerto Ricans excel more in the arts than whites," responses were overwhelmingly positive with 100% of the islanders and 76% of the mainlanders believing this to be the case.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In reviewing the responses of both groups one initially sees some over all consensus between them. However, one also notes that some responses were inconsistent with previous responses given to related to statements (dating and marriage, schools and education). This may be due to some methodological weaknesses in the construction of the questionnaire or an example of the previously mentioned paradox of racial perception among Puerto Ricans. Nevertheless, some tentative conclusions can be made about both groups and their race perceptions. First, there seems to be a stronger social identification between mainland Puerto Ricans and American blacks than island Puerto Ricans and blacks. Any number of socio-economic factors (housing, employment, poverty etc.) on the mainland can account for this.

However, both groups do believe that whites are economically superior to non whites. They both feel that whites make more money and that they live in better neighbor hoods. For Puerto Ricans in general, whites are seen as the most affluent group, thus confirming the notion that the gap between white and non white continues. Both groups were in agreement that blacks and Puerto Ricans excell in the arts to a greater degree than whites. The islanders were much more affirmative (100%) about this than the mainlanders (76%). Again, socio-economic realities may very well account for this discrepancy, including the homogeneity of Puerto Rican society for island Puerto Ricans.

All the respondents classified themselves as either white or as triguero, avoiding the classifications of black, mulatto or other. Perhaps the intermediate racial category is still significant among Puerto Ricans and the particular use of only this one, signifying merely darkness of skin reduces the possibility of racial stigmatizing since mulatto, jabao, moreno etc. definitely indicate black blood. Thus the conclusions of Renzo Sereno (1947) and Seda-Bonilla (1961) that Puerto Ricans suffer from cryptomelanism might hold true. The term cryptomelanism signals the racial insecurity of Puerto Ricans about general identity in their social relations with North Americans. Sereno (1947) specifically states, "Cryptomelanism seems to be an upper middle class and lower middle class phenomenon," and that "lower income people suffer from it only to a limited degree." The respondents in both groups studied here identified themselves a primarily middle class and working middle class.

Further inconsistencies appear regarding their group perception of Puerto Rican families and their own families, particularly among island Puerto Ricans. While 86% of the mainlanders agreed that most Puerto Rican families have some member with African blood, 78% agreed it was true of their own families, 76% of the islanders, however, claimed

it was true in general but only 58% said it was true of their own families. Perhaps the closer social identification among blacks and mainland Puerto Ricans, as noted, accounts for this. Or as Tunin and Feldman (1961) noted, the emerging middle class phenomenon resulting from Puerto Rico's rapid urban, industrial modernization is more imitative of the white American middle class and might account for the greater personal denial among island Puerto Ricans. This same factor would account for the fact that island females were more prone to socialize with white Americans than their male and mainland counterparts.

Similar discrepancies can be seen in their responses to schools and education. Both groups overwhelmingly agreed that private schools are better than public schools. Yet both groups, to a lesser degree, felt that blacks and Hispanics are better off in public schools. Since mainland Puerto Ricans have come to believe that public education has failed them and their children, one can understand their preference for private schools. On the other hand their belief that public schools would treat blacks and Hispanics better than private schools might indicate a hidden fear of prejudice in schools they perceive as predominantly white. This would hold true for the island Puerto Ricans as well who believe also that blacks and Puerto Ricans are better off in public schools. Their preference for private schools, however, would stem from what Tunin and Feldman (1961) saw as a desire to socially escalate. In this context one clearly understands the rapid proliferation of private schools in Puerto Rico for the past 25 years or so.

The same social mobility factor might account for the fact that island females greatly favored marrying white Americans as opposed to everyone else favoring non whites and Puerto Ricans. Joseph Fitzpatrick (1975), in looking at Hispanic intermarriage in New York City, noted that white

Puerto Rican women had the highest rate of outgroup marriage with white American ethnics, which also meant marrying up and out. Considering that 88% of the island females in this sample identified themselves as white, this might explain their strong preference for white American males.

According to these findings, one may tentatively conclude that any clear, concrete perceptions of racial identity among Puerto Ricans are lacking. The discrepancies in both groups clearly indicate that Puerto Ricans say one thing and mean another or better yet, say one thing and avoid or deny their reality. Any number of social, psychological and economic factors either resulting from the Americanisation of Puerto Ricans through the migratory experience or the vast Anglo-American influence in the island, coupled with a confusion resulting from our Hispanic heritage can be called upon to explain it all.

Certainly the role of middle class values and aspirations among Puerto Ricans, as seen in this study and previously shown in the works of Tumin and Feldman (1961) and Eduardo Seda-Bonilla (1961) account or help explain this confusion. It would see that those in the lowest and highest social strata have far less confusion about racial identity, especially in light of the traditional Hispanic class-race perception. For the working middle class, the concern with upward mobility is coupled with the anxiety of whiteness and non whiteness among individuals.

Further research focusing in on more specific variables is obviously needed to answer many questions still unanswered. It is also obvious that as long as these discrepancies and confusions remain among Puerto Ricans, their ability to be cohesive as an ethnic group is severely limited and thus they remain more powerless by these divisions and demials, particularly if they are to deal effectively with the not so subtle vagaries of white American racism.

Denying or confusing racial identity won't solve the inherent problems of racism. Neither will it do much for the subsequent generations who

will only be hurt more by the continued lack of a positive self image. This positive self image can only come when the individual truly knows who and what he is and fully comes to terms with it. Samuel Betances (1971) summed it up as follows:

The point being suggested here is that the problem of color is serious enough in Puerto Rican life to complicate further the second generation's search for ethnicity in the mainland. As the second generations looks toward the island and toward their homes, they don't find a people who have solved the problem of black and white. Instead they find further reasons for added anxiety, confusion, and feelings of uncertainty. Pointing out that Puerto Rico does not have race riots does not solve the problem of a youngster who must not only deal with a world outside his home which is unsympathetic and at times cruel, but he also must confront his family and Puerto Rican neighbors who for reasons all their own seem to be making efforts toward concealment of color. p.8

These reasons are indeed crucial enough to warrant more direct and extensive research on this topic. As Oscar Lewis (1965) stated, regarding his research on the culture of poverty in Puerto Rico, "No se puede tapar el cielo con la mano or you can't cover up the sky with you hand." Neither can we persist to cover up or ignore the many controversies concerning the question of racial identity of and among Puerto Ricans.

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APPENDIX: ENGLISH AND SPANISH QUESTIONNAIRES

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NONWHITE = BLACK AND HISPANIC

RELIGION _____

SEX _____

CLASS _____

YEARS OF FORMAL
EDUCATION _____

MAINLAND BRED PUERTO RICAN _____

YES NO

- | | | | |
|------|---|-----|-----|
| (1) | Private schools are better than public schools. | () | () |
| (2) | It is more preferable to date a nonwhite than a white person. | () | () |
| (3) | It is more preferable to marry a white person than a nonwhite. | () | () |
| (4) | It is more preferable to study with a white person than with a nonwhite. | () | () |
| (5) | The atmosphere in the workplace is more comfortable if there are more white people than nonwhite. | () | () |
| (6) | It is more preferable to live in a Puerto Rican neighborhood than in a white neighborhood. | () | () |
| (7) | It is more preferable to live in a racially mixed neighborhood than in a white neighborhood. | () | () |
| (8) | Dancing is more comfortable in an all white club. | () | () |
| (9) | Dancing is more comfortable in a racially mixed club. | () | () |
| (10) | Dancing is more comfortable in a Puerto Rican club. | () | () |
| (11) | Nonwhites are better off in public schools. | () | () |
| (12) | White people make more money than nonwhites. | () | () |
| (13) | Nonwhites live in better neighborhoods than whites. | () | () |
| (14) | Nonwhites live in neighborhoods similar to those that white people live in. | () | () |
| (15) | The majority of Puerto Rican families have some family members with black (African) features. | () | () |
| (16) | But my family is an exception. | () | () |
| (17) | How would you classify yourself? (A) WHITE (B) BLACK (C) MULATTO (A) (D) TRIGUENO (A) (E) OTHER _____ | | |
| (18) | Nonwhites tend to excell more in the arts than whites. | () | () |

¿Qué se considera usted? (A) BLANCO(a) (B) NEGRO(a) (C) MULATO(a)
(D) TRIGUENO(a) (E) OTRO _____

RELIGIÓN _____

SEXO _____

CLASE _____

AÑOS DE EDUCACIÓN ESCOLAR _____

SI NO

- | | | | |
|------|---|-----|-----|
| (1) | Las escuelas privadas son mejores que las escuelas públicas. | () | () |
| (2) | Es preferible casarse con un norteamericano(a) que con un(a) Puertorriqueño(a). | () | () |
| (3) | Es preferible casarse con un(a) norteamericano(a) que con un(a) Negro(a) americano(a). | () | () |
| (4) | El ambiente del trabajo es mas cómodo cuando hay mas Puertorriqueños y Negros americanos que norteamericanos. | () | () |
| (5) | Es mas preferible vivir en un vecindario norteamericano que un vecindario Puertorriqueño. | () | () |
| (6) | Es mas cómodo bailar en un club racialmente integrado. | () | () |
| (7) | Es mas cómodo bailar en un club norteamericano. | () | () |
| (8) | Es mas cómodo bailar en un club Puertorriqueño. | () | () |
| (9) | Los hispanos y negros americanos estan mejor en las escuelas públicas. | () | () |
| (10) | Los hispanos y negros americanos ganan mas dinero que los norteamericanos. | () | () |
| (11) | Los norteamericanos viven en vecindarios mejores que los hispanos y negros americanos. | () | () |
| (12) | Los hispanos y negros americanos viven en vecindarios semejantes a los vecindarios norteamericanos. | () | () |
| (13) | Los hispanos y negros americanos se superan mas en los deportes que los norteamericanos. | | |
| (14) | Los hispanos y negros americanos se superan mas en las bellas artes (bailar, pintar) que los norteamericanos. | () | () |
| (15) | La mayoría de las familias Puertorriqueñas tienen familiares con raza africana. | () | () |
| (16) | Pero mi familia es una excepción. | () | () |